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ABSTRACT

Whether people really have more or less free time than they did 20 years ago, it is undeniable that many families feel harried. There are many benefits to organized activities for children and adolescents, but parents must be careful not to overload a child's schedule. Every family is different, and it is up to the parents to decide what is possible and acceptable for the child. This booklet outlines signs of stress that may be affecting a child or family adversely. Suggestions are given for setting aside family time, expanding the day, and recognizing what is stressing the family. Keeping a time diary can provide insight into what causes stress. Stress management tips are given. (Contains 17 references.) (SLD)

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A PARENTING SKILLS SERIES FOR FAMILIES WITH ADOLESCENT CHILDREN

family time

time management and stress reduction

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EDITED BY

DIANE FRANKLIN AND KAREN BANKSTON

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WISCONSIN CLEARINGHOUSE
FOR PREVENTION RESOURCES

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from "Who's Raising the Family?"
one of a series published by Wisconsin Clearinghouse for Prevention Resources

edited by
Diane Franklin
Karen Bankston

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"Slow Down and Live" is an African song I sing inside my head
when I begin flitting around like a hen with her head wrung off:
"Brother slow down and live,
brother slow down and live,
brother slow down and live,
you've got a long way to go..."

MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN,
THE MEASURE OF OUR SUCCESS: A LETTER TO MY CHILDREN AND YOURS

Linda Williams, a mother of three, runs a continual race.

She races to her job as a busy travel agent. She races to drop off her daughters at dance class several times a week. She races to take her son, depending on the season, to soccer, baseball, or gymnastics. She races to clean her home before guests arrive. If she's a little stressed out sometimes — *and who wouldn't be?* — chalk it up to the lifestyle of modern-day families.

Certainly, life in most families is not slow-paced. Time seems to be in short supply these days. Even with such conveniences as computers, microwave ovens, and car phones, families today seem much more harried than their counterparts from the 1950s or 60s. Every turn-of-the-21st-century family has the same amount of time those earlier families had: 168 hours every week. It's what you do with that time that dictates the quality of your family life.

ARE WE OUT OF TIME?

A common perception is that we have less time than ever. Some people put in longer hours at "downsized" corporations trying to produce the same output with fewer people. Other people work two jobs to support their families. "Stay-at-home" moms, meanwhile, contradict that term. They are constantly on the move, driving children to soccer games, music lessons, birthday parties, and other activities.

Juliet B. Schor supports the time crunch perception in her 1992 book, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure.* She reports that the time Americans spend on their jobs has risen steadily since the late 1960s. The average employed person in 1987 worked an additional 163 hours

per year, as compared to workers in 1969. That's the equivalent of an extra month of paid labor over a year.

Paid employment is not the only labor that eats up time. According to Schor, many Americans spend just as much time working in the home as outside it. She cites a 1987 poll in which Americans reported having only 16.5 hours of leisure per week after job and household obligations are met.

Not everyone believes that time famine is so widespread. The 1997 book, *Time for Life: The Surprising Ways Americans Use Their Time*, challenges the perception that we have never been busier. Authors John P. Robinson and Geoffrey Godbey used time diaries to document what they call a climb in free time starting in the mid-1960s.

"Many social commentators continue to claim that Americans have little free time," the authors write."As measured in our time diaries, however, free time in 1985 averaged almost 40 hours a week for all people aged 18-64; that compares with less than 35 hours in 1965."

Where does that extra free time go? Much of it is sucked into the black hole known as television. Robinson and Godbey's studies show that television takes up nearly 40 percent of the discretionary time Americans have at their disposal.

Robinson and Godbey define "free time" and "leisure time" differently. Free time includes activities like adult education, religious activities, fitness pursuits, and volunteer work. "Leisure" refers to uncommitted time for such activities as reading, socializing, hobbies, and other recreation. An adult who is active in civic and church organizations, works out three nights a week at the gym, and squeezes in a class at the community college while raising a family has little leisure time.

BUSY PARENTS, BUSY KIDS

Adults are not the only people with hectic schedules. In addition to school, preteens and teenagers have many opportunities for after-school sports, clubs, and social activities. Young

people with working parents often have responsibilities to tend to at home. As they enter high school, many teenagers add part-time jobs to already busy schedules.

Whether people really have more or less free time than they did 20 years ago, you and your family may still feel harried. Some people are so busy they forget how to relax. They seem to think leisure time is wasted time. Even their vacations are packed with activities, like hectic visits to theme parks or long drives to crowded beaches. With vacations like these, families may return home more stressed out than when they left.

In the article "Are We Having Fun Yet?" Elia Kacapyr notes:

> "We sometimes seem to treat our leisure activities as obligations, things to check off the list of 'worthwhile things to do,' regardless of whether we enjoy them or not. The pace of both work and pleasure has increased significantly. This creates our sense of time deficit. We're doing more than we used to, but we perceive that we could do more and go faster, if only we could cram it in."

It almost seems quaint to think of what families used to do with their leisure time. What comes to mind are visions, decades old, when neighborhood kids left their homes on warm summer evenings to play "kick the can" or spent entire Saturdays in an endless sandlot baseball game or making up dance routines to popular songs on the radio.

These days, those leisure time activities seem to be more "organized," with baseball, soccer, and football leagues and dance and art programs. The problem with organized events is that they tend to be scheduled at specific times, often at some distance from the neighborhood. Parents need to provide transportation to these activities and help keep everyone's schedule straight. Families gulp down dinner and pile the dishes in the sink so that they can get to softball practice by 6 p.m.

Despite the time commitment, these organized activities serve a useful purpose. Neighborhoods where people sit on their front porches and socialize while children hang out together in back yards are not as common as they were 30 years ago. People are too busy to get to know their neighbors, so those social networks never develop. Television, video games, and the Internet keep kids indoors. In some urban areas, the safety of young people wandering unsupervised is a major concern. Thus, parents seek to keep their children active and socially connected through organized activities. Their children become friends with team members and fellow dancers.

These organized activities also play a role in keeping kids at arm's length from alcohol and other drugs. Linda Williams, the mother we met earlier, sees several benefits in keeping her daughters, ages 12 and 15, involved in dance class and competition. Dancing and performing helps build their self-esteem and steers them away from situations where alcohol and other drugs are available.

AVOIDING THE "SUPER" PREFIX

Despite the benefits of these activities, be careful not to overload your child's schedule. You may feel overwhelmed by your own obligations at work and home, with adult education classes, workout routines, and civic organizations. But guard against turning your child's daily routine into a miniature overscheduled version of your own.

Trying to be a "superparent" who successfully juggles family, work, and other life commitments day after day is an impossible goal. Sooner or later, you need to take a break away from your busy schedule. In the same way, "superkids" need some down time. Young people constantly pressured into achieving—in academics, athletics, music, student leadership and so forth—may react in a variety of ways, many of them harmful and unhealthy. They may become resentful and rebellious. They may become tense and anxious from the pressures of an overly full schedule. Some of them may even turn to alcohol and other drugs to "relax," just as some adults do.

It's especially crucial not to force your children into extracurricular activities they don't like. Williams emphasizes that her daughters are involved in dance activities by choice. "The only reason we do so much of this is because they love it," Williams says. "Competitions can be stressful, but they get so much out of it, and it's something I enjoy watching them do."

Every family is different. It's up to you to decide and accept what is possible for you and your family. In his book, *Working and Caring*, Dr. T. Berry Brazelton, professor emeritus of pediatrics at Harvard Medical School, notes that the "supermom" syndrome (and presumably, those of "superdad" and "superkid" as well) can be cured by setting realistic expectations for yourself and your child:

> "It is impossible, or at least counterproductive, for you to try to be a 'supermom' — and it costs a child more than it's worth to be pushed too hard to achieve. Making it through, as a caring family working together, may be the most important goal all of you can achieve."

This is not to say that you should have low expectations for your child. To the contrary, you should spell out what you expect at home and at school. It may even help to write those expectations down, suggests John Rosemond, author of *A Family Value*. Rosemond used this technique with his own family. "Putting everything on paper made our expectations not only explicit, but real," he reports. "Willie (Rosemond's wife) and I were no longer wishing that Eric would take out the garbage or that Amy would sweep the floor. These expectations were now 'law.'"

If your child seems stressed out by too much activity, help her sort through her schedule. Does she enjoy everything she's involved with? Are there any activities that could be dropped, even for a while? Help her identify possible time-wasters that she could ditch in favor of more enjoyable activities. Is she watching too much television? Spending too much time on video games or in Internet chat rooms with friends? Some time spent in front of the TV, especially

when the whole family watches together, can be a perfect time to unwind. But too much time spent in video pursuits can leave not enough time for other activities. The result can be an anxious time crunch, marked by missed appointments and overdue homework.

It's a good idea to keep track of how much time your family spends in front of the TV and computer. You may want to set some limits. This may not be a popular decision at first, but your child may find he enjoys the extra time to read, study, develop hobbies, and even talk with mom and dad.

QUALITY VERSUS QUANTITY

Some time-pressed parents fall back on "quality time." That concept suggests that parents can spend less time with their children as long as that time is meaningful and focused solely on the children. In her book *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home & Home Becomes Work*, author Arlie Russell Hochschild calls quality time "a way of transferring the cult of efficiency from office to home. Instead of nine hours a day with a child, we declare ourselves capable of getting the 'same result' with one more intensely focused total quality hour."

Brazelton suggests that quality time can be effective as long as your child receives your undivided, uninterrupted attention. "Though it sounds like a cliché, quality of time with children is more critical than quantity," he writes.

> "A short period during which you are really theirs means more to them than a whole evening of half-distracted availability. ... For the child, your expressed interest in his or her day and social life is a real support. Children who feel this interest have more confidence in themselves. They have an important audience to show off for and to live up to."

signs of stress

IN THE RIGHT AMOUNTS, STRESS IS NORMAL, EVEN HEALTHY. IT KEEPS US MOTIVATED AND ACTIVE. HERE ARE SOME SIGNS THAT YOUR CHILD MAY BE UNDER TOO MUCH STRESS:

Low self-esteem
Little energy
Short attention span
Excessive sleepiness
Hyperactivity
Frequent depression
Inactivity
Frequent misbehavior
Angry outbursts
Tendency to fight
Easily provoked frustration
Use of adult sexual terms
Tendency to say bad things about oneself
Refusal to follow instructions
Unsteady gait
Strange voices, grunts, and growls
Frequent crying
Sulkiness
Detachment and unresponsiveness
Reluctance to communicate
Change in eating habits
Mood swings
Increased defiance/rejection of authority
Change in appearance and personal hygiene
Change in personality
Drop in grades

HERE ARE SOME SYMPTOMS THAT STRESS MAY BE AFFECTING YOU ADVERSELY:

Unresponsiveness to your child
Frequent illness
Low energy
Frequent depression
Confusion
Low self-esteem
Abusiveness to others
Suspicion
Alcohol or other drug abuse
Insomnia
Constant worry
Inability to make quick decisions
Feelings of being overwhelmed
Fearfulness
Poor eating habits
Constant complaining
Tension headaches
Desire to be alone more often
Rejection of advice and assistance
Mood swings
Changes in sleep habits
Irritability

Adapted from *Keeping Youth Drug-Free: A Guide for Parents, Grandparents, Elders, Mentors and other Caregivers,* Center for Substance Abuse Prevention and the National PTA, 1997.

SETTING ASIDE FAMILY TIME

The important thing is to show your child that you value your family above all other aspects of your life. Even if you must spend time away from them during the day, you are committed to spending time with them regularly, predictably, and reliably.

"Most people clearly feel that family is top priority," writes Stephen R. Covey, author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Families.* "Most would even put family above their own health, if it came to it. They would put family ahead of their own life. They would even die for their family. But when you ask them to really look at their lifestyle and where they give their time and their primary attention and focus, you almost always find that family gets subordinated to other values — work, friends, private hobbies."

Covey suggests that families get together at a regularly scheduled time each week. Certainly, the hectic pace of life can interfere with good intentions. Yet, Covey notes:

> "The most important thing is to make the commitment to do it: 'Once a week, no matter what, we will have family time together.' If you can, set aside a specific night to do it. Schedule it on your family calendar. You may have to change that night occasionally if something really urgent comes up, but if this happens, immediately reschedule it for another time during the week."

Setting aside a day for the family to reconnect can be extremely satisfying. For the Williams family, that day is Sunday. "We'll have Sunday morning breakfast together and a nice Sunday dinner," Williams explains. "Then every Sunday night, we rent a video to watch as a family." That's a good way to recharge the batteries before the family starts another hectic week of work, school, dance lessons, and ballgames.

What if your child objects to having regular family time? This is less likely to happen if you get his input. Let everyone reach a consensus as to which day of the week is best and also let

everyone provide ideas on what to do with that time. Watching a video, playing board games, telling family stories — all of these activities can lead to a sense of family togetherness. The best activities are those in which you interact and share a piece of your lives with one another.

Don't forget the little rituals that can make daily life in a family special, like sharing dinner together, setting the table, or filling the dishwasher. If these activities can be shared and interspersed with conversation, they serve a dual purpose for you and your family. They get the job done, and they bring everyone closer together.

Something that doesn't need to be penciled into the schedule is a little bit of affection. Williams noted that her youngest child, age 7, is still at the age where he likes to share hugs. But even with teenagers, a hug or pat on the shoulder can be a great rejuvenator in the middle of a stressful day.

Don't forget the out-of-the-ordinary event that can add greatly to your quality of life: a trip to the zoo, a weekend camping trip, or a family vacation. These activities can relieve stress and build family memories that can last well into your child's adulthood.

EXPANDING THE DAY?

If spending time with your family is the top priority, you may have to rethink other activities that currently fill your day. For instance, perhaps you have always prided yourself on a neat house, but lately you haven't been able to keep up with the vacuuming, dusting, washing, and scrubbing. You might have to give yourself permission to let things go on occasion. As Williams, the busy mother of three observes, "Spending quality time with my kids is more important to me, so I've learned not to worry so much about how my house looks."

When Williams' house needs a cleaning, the whole family pitches in. "Sometimes, we'll make a game of it," she says. "When the house needs a quick cleaning, I'll say, 'OK, let's see what we can all get done in five minutes — go!' And I'll be surprised how much gets done."

Families who can afford to do so save precious time by taking their laundry to the cleaners or hiring a housecleaning service once a month. An alternative for families on a tight budget might be "swapping" an occasional cleaning day with friends. Imagine leaving your house in moderate disarray and coming home to a clean kitchen, shiny bathroom, and vacuumed carpet. It's enough to rejuvenate even the most stressed-out parent.

Of course, not every family can afford those options. In those cases, stress relief may come from dividing up duties among all household members. Start with a family meeting to explain that life will be easier for everyone if parents and children spend a few minutes each day on regular chores. Your child may grumble at first, but once her chores become routine, the complaints will likely end — especially if she notices a difference in lowered household stress levels.

WHAT'S STRESSING YOU OUT?

What causes stress in your life? For many working parents, it's the task of balancing work and family life. Ellen Bravo, author of *The Job/Family Challenge,* cites a study by Family and Work Institute, which shows how great a toll stress takes on working couples. According to the survey, 42 percent say they feel "used up" by the end of the day and 66 percent say they don't spend enough time with their kids. "What workers give up most is time for self; they want more flexibility, more time for personal and family life," Bravo writes.

The structure of most workplaces offers little flexibility. "In reality, most people still work in places designed for employees with spouses at home full time, even though fewer and fewer people fit that description," Bravo notes. "The workforce is changing, and the work*place* hasn't kept pace."

Schor agrees that work is implicated in the rise of stress. "Thirty percent of adults say they experience high stress nearly every day; even higher numbers report high stress once or twice a week," she writes, noting that a shortage of family time contributes to the stress of

working families. "Half the population now says they have too little time for their families. The problem is particularly acute for women: in one study, half of all employed mothers reported that work caused either 'a lot' or an 'extreme' level of stress."

Time pressures also have reduced the time that two-earner couples spend together, which often has a detrimental impact on marital satisfaction. "These couples often just don't have enough time to talk to each other," Schor writes.

The quickened pace of life also contributes to stress. We've all seen examples of people trying to do two things at once: eating lunch and editing a report; talking on their cell phone while speeding down the highway, scribbling work notes on the sidelines of their children's games. Authors Robinson and Godbey call this habit "time-deepening."

Time-deepening activity may explain the reason why so many Americans today feel rushed all the time. Robinson and Godbey report 38 percent of Americans aged 18 to 64 described themselves in a 1992 survey as "always feeling rushed." Compare that to a similar survey from 1965, when only 24 percent of the 18-to-64 sample group described themselves that way. However, the number of respondents in the 1995 survey who classified themselves as "always feel rushed" was down 6 percentage points from 1992.

Difficulties with children also cause stress in parents' lives, according to a national survey conducted jointly in 1997 by *Family Circle* and *Child* magazines. The results were presented in the article "Less Stress, More Joy." Parents cited managing their children's behavior as a major stressor in their lives. They cited "not listening" as the most troubling form of misbehavior, followed by arguing, fighting with siblings, lying, and not cooperating.

"Parents who find ways to relax are less likely to get angry when under stress, according to our survey," the article concludes. "The trick is learning to take chaos in stride. Rather than

focusing on the immediate stressor, approach the problem with a positive attitude. Adopt an 'I can handle this' stance, and you'll be surprised at how easily — and calmly — you'll do so."

Parents should be aware that children may react to stress very differently than adults do. A variety of factors can cause stress in a child's life:

- moving to a new neighborhood and school
- coping with parents' divorce or regular disagreements
- losing a close relative to death
- facing peer pressure to use alcohol and other drugs
- striving to achieve good grades amid pressures from parents and teachers
- worrying about their physical appearance, especially as they begin to take notice of the opposite sex.

An article in *Working Mother* notes that lack of control can add to children's stress levels. You can counter this by ensuring some level of predictability in your child's daily routine. "Kids have so little say in their lives that they count on things like daily routines to keep them feeling centered and in command," the article states. "When something disrupts this delicate balance, their whole world can seem as if it's falling apart."

EXERCISE: KEEP A TIME DIARY

To get a handle on what causes stress in your life, try keeping a time diary. For three or four days next week, record everything you do each day and the time it takes to do it: sleeping, personal grooming, driving, eating, working, household chores, watching television, and interacting with your child, spouse, and other family members. Don't change your behavior for the sake of writing down more meaningful activities. You'd only be fooling yourself. You need to know how you spend your time before you can make reasonable changes.

When your diary is completed, analyze your activities. Do you see any hidden "time-wasters" like excessive TV viewing or too much time spent on your daily commute? Are there ways you can eliminate these time-wasters?

Certainly, cutting down TV viewing can be an "easy fix." Start by going through the TV guide and circling the programs you and your child like to watch together. Try turning on the TV only for those programs.

Other time-wasters might be eliminated with creative solutions. For instance, perhaps you can work out an arrangement with your employer for flextime, allowing you to drive to work when traffic is less likely to slow you down. Or perhaps you can work four 10-hour days instead of five 8-hour days, cutting out a day of commuting altogether.

If your child also is coping with a time crunch, encourage her to keep a time diary as well. Then, challenge her to identify and get rid of time-wasters. Of course, being a kid means having the right to wile away some time in unstructured activities, so let her have some time to just goof off—especially if you are goofing off with her.

MANAGE YOUR FAMILY'S STRESS

Here are some ways to relieve stress for you and your child.

Learn to say no. Can you bow out of that extra assignment at work? Can you decline a second year as membership secretary for your neighborhood association? Maybe you can't say no to everything, but you don't have to say yes either. Don't feel guilty about turning down a request. If you spend that extra time with your family, you have nothing to feel guilty about.

Don't overcommit your child's schedule. You may want your child to be in the marching band, the school play, student council and Spanish club while also playing organized sports,

taking piano and tap, and maintaining a B+ average. That schedule is not possible. Make sure your child only commits to the extracurricular activities he enjoys. He shouldn't try out for the school play just to please you. Just because you always wanted to learn the piano doesn't mean you should force your child to do so. If you want to learn to play the piano, take lessons yourself. Let your child choose his own favorite pastimes.

Reduce your own stress. Your worries and anxieties not only affect your well-being, but you may be unconsciously transferring your mood to your child. Learn to reduce your stress levels by listening to calming music, spending time outdoors, or curling up with a good book, for instance.

Create a family planning calendar. This calendar should include everything: mom or dad's out-of-town travel, kids' field trips, parent/teacher conferences, ballgames, music lessons, and doctor's appointments. One calendar that includes absolutely every single commitment will mean less last-minute surprises, less scurrying to make an appointment, and less stress. It will also provide a visual reminder if your life is getting too busy.

Share family chores. Designating chores to family members will teach responsibility and build self-esteem for a job well done. Write down a list of chores that you expect family members to perform, and hold them to those assignments.

Use outside resources. Even with division of labor within the family, your home still isn't up to snuff? Hire an outside cleaning service or negotiate with a friend/family to come in every couple weeks. The laundry looks like Mt. Everest? Hire someone to wash, dry, and iron — at least to catch you up. Can't make it to the supermarket? Try on-line shopping with home delivery. The cost of these services may be more than offset by the reduction in stress, time, and travel.

Connect with your spouse. If you are married, make sure you don't lose sight of your relationship as a couple. Schedule regular evenings out — just the two of you. If that's not feasible, meet occasionally for lunch. Spend time with each other in the evenings after the children have

gone to bed. Keeping this core relationship intact can provide a sense of equilibrium that steadies the entire family.

Disconnect from technology. One of the biggest time-wasters in modern history is — you guessed it — the television set. For even one night a week, take some time away from TV. While you're at it, unplug from the Internet, put video games off limits, and let the answering machine grab your calls. You may be surprised what your family can accomplish when you don't have these electronic distractions eating up your time.

Exercise together. It's been said that "the family that plays together stays together." That can certainly be true. Take up a new sport together, like tennis, downhill skiing, or even a nightly walk. Physical activity is a great stress reliever. In addition, a common sport can bring a family together. You can spend hours together pursuing your common interests and many hours afterwards talking about the fun you had.

Accept imperfection. Your daughter isn't going to make the spelling bee finals, your son hasn't cleaned his room, and you can't make the perfect soufflé for your mother-in-law's birthday dinner. And maybe the house is a bit of a mess from time to time, but everyone's healthy… happy… and that's what counts. Learn to accept that your family is human and you don't have time to make everything absolutely perfect. If love and laughter fill your home, that's all the perfection you need.

TIME AND STRESS MANAGEMENT RESOURCES

Bookstores and office-supply outlets sell resources to help individuals and families manage their time. Day planners, calendars, electronic planners, time management self-help books, and magazine articles on the subject can offer helpful advice.

In some cases, the stresses and anxiety of family life become too much for individuals to handle on their own. In that case, counseling may be the best solution.

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